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AUTHOR Smith, Ruth; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Elderly residents of a large southern city were surveyed in a study designed to examine the effects of media advertising on the elderly's perceptions. The 91 subjects completed a questionnaire on social factors such as the subjects' self-image, their perceptions of the elderly as portrayed by the mass media, product brand preferences, sex role perceptions, and the ability to distinguish facts from exaggeration in advertising. The results showed that advertising had a negative but insignificant effect on sex role perceptions and self-image. The findings also suggested that exposure to advertising in the mass media reduces the elderly's ability to filter fact from exaggeration, and that brand switching by the elderly is directly related to advertising exposure. (HTH)

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THE IMPACT OF MASS COMMUNICATION ON CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING AMONG THE ELDERLY

By

Ruth Smith, George P. Moschis and Roy L. Moore
Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia

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THE IMPACT OF MASS COMMUNICATION ON CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING AMONG THE ELDERLY

INTRODUCTION

With our declining birth rate and increasing life expectancy rate, the "graying" of America becomes a significant factor in business marketing strategies for consumer goods and services. Based on U.S. Census projections, some 31 million persons will be over 65 by the year 2000. In fact, in only 50 years (2030), the elderly population will have increased 125 percent (to 52 million people) while the general population will have increased only about 35 percent.

According to a recent study for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution by Market Opinion Research, individuals 65 and over already comprise 9 percent (117,000) of adults in the 15-county Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area of Atlanta. If we combine this segment with the 55-64 group, this larger group makes up 20 percent (225,000) of the total population (1,267,000).

When we consider that the 55-plus age group is already the single most important segment of the U.S. Consumer Market that includes 38 million people with $350 billion in annual income (U.S. News & World Report, 1980), we would expect businesses to commit a sizable chunk of their advertising budgets to persuasive appeals to this group. Yet, as Patricia Reed Scott (Director of the "Getting On" Television Project for the New York City Department for the Aging) testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging in 1978, "the television

industry. . .has operated on a market preference for viewers from 18 to 49 years of age." According to Ms. Scott, the A. C. Nielsen Television Index did not regularly include individuals over 55 until 1977.

Because the elderly are becoming a major economic force in the marketplace (U.S. News and World Report 1980), a logical first step toward closing the serious gap in our knowledge of the interrelationship of the elderly and the mass media is to focus on consumer decision making among the elderly. While extensive studies have been conducted on consumer decision making among children, adolescents (including the junior investigator's own research during the last six years), young adults and middle-aged, there is a paucity of research on consumer attitudes, knowledge and behavior of the elderly.

BACKGROUND

Previous articles have outlined a conceptual model of consumer socialization and consumer behavior. The model, which is based upon sociological and psychological theories, consists of five types of variables: social structural, age or life cycle, learning processes, socialization agents and outcomes of socialization (e.g. Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and Moore 1978 and 1979). Social structural (e.g. SES, race) and developmental (age or life cycle) variables are viewed as antecedents of consumer socialization; they may affect outcomes (criterion variables) either directly or indirectly by impacting upon socialization processes. Socialization processes incorporate both agents and learning processes and they are assumed to have a direct effect on criterion variables. Examples of consumer socialization agents used in previous research include

the mass media, peers, family, and school (e.g. Ward 1974; Moschis and Churchill 1978). Learning processes include: social interaction, such as frequency of interacting with an agent; modeling or imitating the agent's behavior or attitudes; and reinforcement, either positive or negative.

Very little is known concerning the role of the mass media as agents of adult socialization although at least once major group of researchers (Comstock et al. 1978) has hypothesized that since older individuals go to television for much of their information, this medium, in particular, may have a definite impact on norms, values and knowledge. Corney et al. (1977) have already shown that television can influence adult buying behaviors. Kubey (1980) has hypothesized that since adult socialization is thought to occur most readily when it builds on previously established socializing agents, television (and presumably other mass media) may have a more profound impact on future cohorts of the aged who will have a more extensive history of exposure to mass communication and its influences. For example, if present trends hold, by the time today's children reach 65, they will have watched television an average of more than nine full years.

If the mass media constitute major socializing agents for older individuals, as they appear to be with children and adolescents, it is essential that we understand the nature of this influence if we are to effectively use mass communication to reveal:

> ...the wide variety of affirmative steps which can ameliorate many of the problems of getting older. This approach (producing TV programming concerned with aging for mass audiences), balanced by portrayals of the strengths and satisfactions which can come with age, would provide the public with a more well informed concept of what it means to age. It follows that people will be less negative and fearful about aging if they know what can generally be expected, what can be done, and if they are not left in the dark. (p. 30)

HYPOTHESES

According to George Herbert Meade and Charles Cooley, social validation is crucial to the development of an individual's self-esteem. As a major social institution, masss media may comprise a significant factor in the formation of many elderly individuals' self-conceptions (Kubey 1980).

One hypothesis, for example, holds that older persons who live isolated lives may especially be vulnerable to television's influence on aspects of their lives for which traditional social roles leave them relatively uninformed, particularly if they cannot test the validity of their perceptions through interpersonal communication (Comstock et al. 1978). Advertising, in particular, has been blamed as a major cause of negative self-concepts among the elderly (Kubey 1980).

A recent study by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication concluded that:

> More older characters are treated with disrespect than are characters in any other age group. About 70 percent of the older men and more than 80 percent of the older women are not held in high esteem or treated courteously, a very different pattern of treatment than that found for younger characters. Similarly, a much larger proportion of older characters than younger characters are portrayed as eccentric or foolish (Gerbner et al. 1980, p. 45).

Even more interesting is that the Annenberg study found a

significant positive relationship between amount of television viewing and negative and unfavorable perceptions of older people, especially among young viewers. This relationship held even with important demographic variables such as education, income, sex and age held constant. Furthermore, the more television an individual watches, the more likely he or she believes that people (especially women) become old earlier in life.

Dr. George Gerbner (director of the study) and his colleagues conclude:

> In every case, heavier viewing makes a consistently negative contribution to the public's image of the personal characteristics of the elderly, and the quality of their lives. We did not find watching television to be associated with any (emphasis theirs) positive images of older people (p. 47).

It should be noted that while prime-time (8-11 p.m.) TV programming is lacking in older characters and presents a generally negative image of the elderly, daytime serial dramas apparently differ in their portrayals. A recent study (Cassata et al. 1980) found that some 15.9 percent of the characters appearing in 13 daytime soap operas were judged 55 or older, with more than half of these characters in their sixties. According to the researchers, the "overall physical appearance of the older characters portrayed was...positive...the profile of the older person that emerges...is one of an attractive individual, usually employed in an important position, who lives independently and makes up an important part of the soap operal world."

The portrayal of the elderly in magazine advertisements parallels their images on television. A study by Gantz, Gartenberg and Rainbow (1980) of seven national magazines (People, Reader's Digest, Time, Sports Illustrated, Ladies' Home Journal, Playboy and Ms.) found that only 6 percent of all ads sampled contained older people with little variation across magazines. Seventy-four percent of the elderly in the ads were men, suggesting that the elderly, especially women, "are not considered to play a major role in the consumer society."

In spite of the obvious scarcity of the elderly in most television commercials, adults over 55 view more television than any other segment of the population, including children, according to the A. C. Nielsen Television Index. In fact, a recent series of Nielsen studies consistently found television viewing to be the predominant leisure-time activity of older adults with information, social engagement and compensation the chief motivations for viewing.

Although the elderly make extensive use of television, they tend to criticize this medium more than newspapers and radio (Real et al. 1980). The most common concern is that television programs do not provide enough educational offerings, advice on problem solving and information about social programs.

The preceding discussion suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to mass media advertising is negatively correlated with self image of the elderly.

H2: Exposure to mass media advertising is negatively correlated with perceptions of the elderly in advertising.

H3: Exposure to mass media advertising is positively correlated with traditional (nonegolitarian) sex-role perceptions regarding consumption-related decision making.

Some studies have suggested that repeated exposure to a message is sufficient to change attitudes and behavior of the audience (McLeod and Becker, 1974).

Certain consumer skills, such as brand preference and ability to filter puffery in advertising may be learned as a result of exposure to mass media advertising; skills which may have implications for consumer socialization research (Moschis & Church, 1978).

H4: Exposure to mass media advertising is positively correlated with the strength of brand prefernce.

H5: Exposure to mass media advertising is negatively correlated with ability to filter puffery in advertisements.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for the study consisted of 91 elderly residents of Atlanta, Ga., members of Life Enrichment Services of Atlanta which includes more than 1,000 Atlanta residents over age 50 who serve as volunteers to more than 5,000 other elderly individuals. Self-administered questionnaires were completed by respondents in February, 1981. Since Life Enrichment Services of Atlanta serves a wide cross-section of older individuals in Atlanta, the sample is considered to be quite representative of Atlanta's elderly population.

Each of the main variables was constructed by summing the appropriate items, using item-to-total correlations to purify the measure, and then using Cronback's alpha to assess the

reliability of the scales. Occupation was measured using Duncan's SES index (1961), and sex was a dichotomous variable (1 = male, 2 = female).

Criterion Variables

Self-image. This scale consisted of three items which loaded significantly (.60 or greater) on the hypothesized factor. Responses to these items (example: "I feel that I am an important member of the community") were measured on a 5-point "strongly agree-strongly disagree" Likert-type scale. The Cronback alpha for this scale was .60.

Perceptions of the elderly as portrayed by mass media. This scale was a measure of how the elderly perceive older persons to be portrayed in advertisements using such items as "Elderly people are shown in television advertisements as being foolish". Seven items measured on a 5-point "strongly agree-strongly disagree" Likert-type scale were summed. The scale had a Cronback alpha coefficient of .79.

Brand preferences refer to the extent to which the respondent has favorite brands of products. The variable was measured in line with previous research (Moschis & Moore 1979, Guest 1944, Wart et al. 1977) by asking subjects to write their favorite brand next to the twelve different products, or leave the space blank to indicate no preference. Responses were coded 1 for brand preference and 0 for no preference on a 0-to-12 point index. This scale had a reliability coefficient (Cronback's alpha) of .80.

Puffery filtering. Puffery filtering refers to the respondent's ability to discriminate "facts" from exaggeration in advertising. The scale consisted of a 7-item accuracy index of "mostly true/neither true nor untrue/mostly untrue" statements. Four of the statements, for example "Honda Civic gets 45 miles per gallon on the highway", were considered to be true, and three of them (example "Bayer works wonders") were considered as puffery. Responses were measured on a 3-point scale: 1 = "believe it is mostly true", 2 = "believe it is neither true nor untrue", 3 = "believe it is mostly untrue" for claims considered to be true and an apporite (3 = "mostly true") coding for the puffery items. Then the seven items were summed to produce the measure with Cronback's alpha coefficient equal to .50.

Sex role perceptions. In family decision making this measure refers to the respondent's perceptions of the relative influence of husband and wife in family decisions. Perceptions were measured across 6 items which loaded significantly (.50 or better) on the hypothesized factor. A typical item of this scale was "Elderly women usually make more purchase decisions than their spouses". Measured on a 5-point "strongly agree-strongly disagree" Likert-type scale and summed across the 7 items, Cronback's alpha coefficient was .65.

Explanatory variable. Mass media advertising influences were measured by summing a 12-item index to which respondents indicated exposure or nonexposure (coded dichotomously as 1-0) to television, newspaper, magazine, and radio advertisements for 12 products or services. The products and services were selected to represent each of 12 major consumer expenditure categories

deliniated by the U.S. Department of Labor. The Cronback alpha coefficient for these measures were .77, .71, and .75. Since intercorrelations among the exposure items was high (.80 or greater), they were summed to form a measure of mass media exposure. This scale had a Cronback's alpha coefficient of .96.

RESULTS

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to evaluate relationships between the five dependent variables and exposure to mass media advertising, as well as with some demographic measures. Table 1 shows relationships among the variables. The data support three of the hypotheses and do not support two.

The negative correlation ($p < .05$) between the measure of perception of the elderly in advertising and exposure to mass media advertising suggests that commerials may have an effect on the elderly's perception of themselves.

Table 1

PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	Exposure to Mass Media Advertising	Age	Sex	Marital Status	SES
1. Self Perception	-.08	.05	.03	-.10	.21*
2. Perceptions of the elderly in Advertising	-.16*	-.15	.10	.11	.13
3. Sex Role	-.04	.20*	-.27*	-.09	-.18
4. Puffery Filtering	-.174*	-.06	-.10	-.16	-.01
5. Brand	-.23*	.04	.06	.05	.17

* Significant level of .05

There is a significant ($p < .05$) negative correlation between exposure to mass media advertising and ability to differentiate between truth and exaggeration in advertising. Thus it appears that greater exposure to mass media advertising is associated with decreased ability to filter puffery. The relationship between exposure to mass media advertising and the extent to which respondents indicate specific brand preferences is significantly ($p < .014$) negative. This suggests that mass media advertising may encourage brand switching among the elderly. This finding is congruent with the fact that the elderly use mass media primarily for information and rational decision making.

Finally, the correlation between the dependent variable and self perception is negative but insignificant, as is the correlation between the dependent variable and sex role perceptions with regard to consumer decision making. Thus H1 and H3 were not supported.

In order to assess the relative influence of the independent variables, multiple regression analysis was used. Table 2 shows the correlations among the independent variables. Since they are low, the possibility that intercorrelations among the predictor variables cuased arbitrary allocation of the total variance to the independent variables is minimized. Table 3 shows relationships between the independent variables and each of the dependent outcome variables. The table entries are standardized regression coefficients, and several are significant, although all of the predictor variables considered in the equation leave a relatively large proportion of the variable unexplained. The best equation (for sex role perception

regarding consumption decisions) accounts for approximately 17% of the variance in sex role attitudes of the elderly. Relationships must therefore be cautiously interpreted.

Table 2

CORRELATION MATRIX OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Exposure to mass media advertising	1.00				
2. Age	.00	1.00			
3. SES	.09	-.04	1.00		
4. Marital Status	.06	-.06	-.21	1.00	
5. Sex	.08	.11	-.09	.20	1.00

Table 3

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EXPLANATORY VARIABLES AND DEPENDENT OUTCOMES

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Self Perception	Perceptions of Elderly in Advertising	Sex Role	Puffery Filtering	Brand Preference
1. Exposure to mass media advertising	-.08	-.19*	-.03	-.15*	-.25*
2. Age	.03	-.13	.24*	-.07	.06
3. SES	.18*	.09	-.03	.04	.20*
4. Marital Status	#	.08	-.04	-.19*	.02
5. Sex	.15*	.11	-.25*	-.09	.03
Multiple R	.36*	.29	.41*	.31	.31

* Significant at .05 level

\# Variable did not enter equation

NOTE: Entries are standardized regression coefficient (beta weights)

Exposure to mass media advertising is related negatively to each outcome, significantly ($p < .05$) to perception of the elderly in advertising, ability to filter puffery, and brand preference ($p < .014$). Age is positively related ($p < .025$) to traditional sex role perceptions, a common finding in the literature (Neugarten 1968; Streib, 1968). Social class is positively ($p < .05$) related to self perception and to brand preference ($p < .014$). This finding is in line with previous studies (e.g. Moschis and Moore 1979). Sex is positively related to self perception ($p < .05$) and negatively related ($p < .006$) to traditional sex role perceptions. This finding, along with the findings on the effects of the other social structural variables are in line with previous studies on sex role perceptions (Neugarten, 1968) and self perceptions (Streib, 1968).

Implications

The findings suggest that exposure to advertising in the mass media reduces ability to filter puffery, that the elderly perceive themselves to be negatively portrayed in mass media advertising, and that brand switching by the elderly is directly related to advertising exposure. Because the elderly make extensive use of television as an information and entertainment source, the implication is that advertisers are in a position to influence the consumer socialization of the aged. As individuals grow older they experience role attrition--through retirement, children leaving home, death of friends or spouse--their life space contracts, and there is less involvement with others. Thus there is a decrease in informal information sources

(family, co-workers, etc.) and a, perhaps compensating, increase in formal information sources (television, newspaper, etc.).

Two widely used theoretical perspectives in gerontological social research are disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961), and activity theory (Lemmon et al., 1972). Disengagement theory explains this contraction of life space as a natural consequence of growing old - a voluntary severing of social ties and retreat into isolation, whereas activity theory explains it as an involuntary exile imposed by society upon the elderly.

Whether the elderly withdraw from society voluntarily or not, advertisers can possibly significantly influence the consumer learning of the elderly. As Ahammer has noted, learning of appropriate role behavior may occur in later years through observation of the mass media (Ahammer, 1969); also some studies suggest that the elderly are more susceptible to pursuasion from consumer information sources when they are socially isolated and perceive themselves as lacking in decision making competence. Given this, and the finding that ability to filter puffery is negatively related to mass media advertising exposure, it may be that some advertising misrepresents elderly people, and some may actually deceive them. This is of importance to advertisers as well as to gerontologists and public policy makers.

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